Melodies from Old Women

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"Behold, he stands behind our wall, he looks in from the windows; he peers through the lattice."

—Song of Songs, 2:9

Early in our marriage, my husband and I shopped for groceries every Sunday—not a simple event. Mama went with us. Each week we guided my husband's eighty-some year old mother to the car. She took tiny steps and held her son's arm as though she was walking a tight-rope. I took her opposite elbow and between the two of us, we placed her gently in the back seat and buckled her in. She would nod a thank you to her son and motion her daughter-in-law to stop fussing and get in the car. She was safe, thanks to family and God.

As we pulled away from our home, a soft, whispering breath would seep through the air. It was barely audible, yet persistent. The further we traveled, the stronger it became—not in volume, but in strength. Mama was talking to herself. Her mouth moved and soft hissing noises were all I could make out.

"She's frightened," I would announce to my husband. "Maybe we should stop the car and tell her everything is fine and not to worry."

"She's not frightened. She's talking under her nose to God. She never travels anywhere without talking to God."

I can't count the times I turned in my seat to observe Mama, praying in her home language of Yiddish. She was in a special world, just her and God. As she prayed beneath her nose, her facial expressions changed as if she was having a conversation with someone next to her.

"She's really talking to God." I surmised every time we traveled with her.

"Of course she is. Don't disturb her." My husband would answer with a serious tone. "She thinks she's alone and no one can hear what they're talking about."

For 12 years, I was privileged to listen to this old woman's prayers. In the early years, I was overly conscious of keeping a kosher kitchen that would meet Mama's expectations. Was I putting everything in the right place; was this spoon now non-kosher because I dropped it in the "red" sink instead of the "blue"? How many mistakes could I make before my mother-in-law would not accept me as 100 percent Jewish? She was such a holy lady. She'd survived Nazis, Stalin, and the KGB, and during these times of oppression, had never compromised on her halakhic responsibilities. She had learned religious boundaries from her parents and grandparents. My husband and his family had paid a handsome price for the privilege of living and remaining Jewish in the former Soviet Union.

Friday evenings, Mama carefully lit her candles, then scurried to each room announcing, "*Shabbas. Gut Shabbas*." My husband explained she needed to bless every piece of space in the house with *Gut Shabbas*! Every religious thought, each action was as natural to her as breathing. She gave it no thought and, I am certain, had no idea I watched and admired her every move.

Mama traveled from Moldova to America as a refugee in the early 1990s with her son and husband to be able to live as a Jew without being afraid. Now, she had an insecure, *ba'alat teshuvah* daughter-in-law who could not speak any of her languages and spent more time worrying about process than how the food tasted. No matter. All was solved one afternoon. Late one summer, Mama became ill and had to be hospitalized. She improved quickly, and while her son was at work, I sat by her bedside. The day before she was able to return home, a cheerful, Orthodox rabbi stopped by to wish her well. He spoke Yiddish and the two of them talked and laughed while I sat mesmerized, wishing I could understand at least every other word.

Finally, Mama fell asleep. The rabbi had pity on me and gently asked, "Did you understand what she was saying?"

"Not a word." I admitted.

"She was talking about you."

Oh, great, I immediately thought. Now the entire community will know what a Jewish failure I am. I waited, precariously for the rabbi to continue.

"She says you're a good girl. You keep a kosher home. You chant the blessing over Shabbat candles with a melody she's never heard before. It's a melody that touches her heart. You take good care of her son. She likes you. But she'd like you to be a bit more modest."

Modest? In a nano-second panic, I quickly checked my skirt and touched my head to see if I forgot to cover my hair that morning. Here was an opportunity for failure I had not counted on.

"No. That's not what your mother-in-law means." The rabbi interrupted as if reading my mind. "She wants to remind you that our people learned modesty from the cat. Everything a cat does is seemingly without effort. When a cat runs, it's as though they will never tire. They move effortlessly. When a dog runs, they labor, they pant and they call attention to themselves. She's overjoyed her son married an Orthodox, religious girl. But, she worries that you are becoming obsessed with right and wrong. You think too much. Rules are important, but if you don't have time to talk with God, what's the point? There is no shame in making a mistake—correct it and move on. She doesn't want you to exchange the

spirituality she hears in your melodies for rules and build an empty shell for the sake of being an Orthodox Jew who lives only to recognize the right butcher."

It was a good lesson. But it was just one of many I'd collected long before I'd met Mama. I've been fortunate to have met excellent and balanced teachers over the years. I've sought out rabbis who I believed were respected, and who touched my heart in some way and were kind, compassionate and honest community leaders. I attended their lectures when I could, bought their books and listened to their tapes. I read and accepted the teachings of scholars and leaders they admired. Every year, I balanced the spiritual with the religious and became a bit more observant and "Orthodox."

Many years ago, a good friend had recently married and moved to the upper midwest. She was newly observant and had married a man who came from an observant Orthodox family. I'd been invited to their new home for Pesah. I arrived early to assist my friend with cleaning and other preparations. Everybody knows it's exhausting to prepare for Pesah. But this was different. My friend was frightened. She feared shame. She was worried she would make a mistake, not make the grade, or that she would say the wrong thing to the right person.

We cleaned and scoured, making sure we had the right food and the right utensils and plates unpacked. Together we worked from sunup until well past midnight. We slept a few hours and were at it again early each morning. Finally, we were close to finishing. As we sat in the kitchen, I observed how tired my friend looked. She could barely hold a conversation. Normally, her eyes sparkled with joy and energy, but on this day they were dull and mirrored defeat.

That afternoon, her husband asked a question about the Pesah silverware. As we soon realized, we'd forgotten to unpack them. My friend immediately sprang to her feet and rummaged frantically through boxes she'd carefully labeled. I watched her body stiffen. She turned to her husband and announced the silverware was misplaced and had been packed with the hametz dishes.

Her husband, a kind person, offered a joke to break the gruesome tension that had entered the room. It was the worst thing he could have done. My friend burst in
to tears of exhaustion and shame, sobbing, "I am just not a good enough Jew. I'm not Orthodox enough. I'll never fit in."

I decided it would be a good time to take a walk around the lake and give my friends some privacy to reignite *shalom bayyit* into the world. While walking, I had a conversation with myself that has continued on and off until this day: What are we doing to ourselves? Is our pursuit of halakhic perfection taking the place of the oppressors that plagued my husband and his family in the former Soviet Union? After all, a Torah observant life should be joyful and balanced with spirituality, connecting us to the source of our purpose and beginnings.

Another story—this one is about a woman who'd lived longer than anyone I'd known. Her
name was Sophie. I met Sophie on her 90th birthday. She lived in a community that had once had an active Orthodox presence, but had succumbed to in-fighting and assimilation. Only a few Jewish families remained and those who had not inter-married, had moved to communities with stronger Orthodox lifestyles. Sophie refused to move. She was responsible for the Hevrah Kadisha, the religious burial society. It became her responsibility to teach the non-religious to bury their dead in the proper manner.

"Just because Jews aren't acting like Jews, doesn't mean they aren't Jews. It's my job to teach them how to do a *taharah*, a purification. My purpose in life is to teach how to sew *takhrihim*[DEA1]. If the young

ones want to buy them from New York, fine. But they still need to learn how to take care of our dead and our cemeteries."

The only services that continued after this century-old community began to dwindle were Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Shabbat services had long since ended. Every Shabbat, I walked to Sophie‘s home and we prayed together, silently—each at our own pace. Sophie fixed an elaborate Shabbat lunch and we talked about Israel and Judaism in general. Sometimes, I'd bring a friend along.

One Shabbat a young woman I'd met at a Women's Study Group in Winnipeg called and asked for Shabbat hospitality. I obliged and arranged to take her to Sophie's house to pray and enjoy Shabbat with this elder, who had joyfully become my best friend. My visitor asked many questions about kashruth and whether or not Sophie was “Orthodox.” She didn't ask if the old woman was Jewish, just Orthodox. I began to regret inviting this young woman to spend Shabbat with us. I could just imagine her telling Sophie the recipe for mock-liver passed down to her from her great-grandmother who was not really Jewish. Silly, I finally decided. Why worry about Sophie? Now 95, she could take care of herself.

We arrived and were welcomed into Sophie's modest home. Sophie made sure we were comfortable before suggesting we join her while she finished her Shabbat prayers. Our visitor began swaying and shuckling; bowing, sitting and standing. Our elder hostess sat on a kitchen chair she always placed in her living room for prayer purposes. Whether she stood or sat, the only discernable movement was in her lips. They moved, continuously without uttering a word. I'd become focused on my own religious expression and upon completing the service, I noticed our visitor had closed her siddur and sat motionless as she listened to Sophie complete her prayers by chanting a soft, haunting melody.

"That was beautiful." Our guest complimented. "Where is that *niggun* from? Is it Hassidic? Is it Mitnaged? It sounds German. Which *rebbe* is it from?"
Sophie placed her siddur on her table and smiled, pleased with the attention. "It's from Sophie. My great-grandmother told us when we were little girls that if a woman doesn't have her own melody, she's destined to be in exile all her life—God forbid."

We chatted and then found our way to Sophie's kitchen where a meal was about to unfold, layer by layer. It was a particularly dark, winter day and Sophie had forgotten to leave the light in the kitchen on. It was like entering a dark cave.

"Oy. The light." Sophie clasped her hands together. "I forgot the light."

This revelation began a halakhic discussion about turning lights on and off on Shabbat. Sophie's two young guests began to discuss ways we could turn the light on. Is there a neighbor we can call, a non-Jew? We talked on and on. This rabbi said that, and that rabbi said this—it went on until Sophie decided to take the matter into her own hands.

"Girls. You rely too much on rabbis. Here's the solution." Sophie, who was all of four feet eight inches tall and almost as wide, reached behind our visitor and switched on the light. "There. Now, that wasn't too much work—was it? You two talk too much and you both take yourselves too seriously."

Did Sophie violate the laws of Shabbat that afternoon? Yes, she did. A few years later I received a call from my visiting friend. She began, "I was wondering. Is Sophie still alive?"

"No, she left the world well after her 100th year."

"Ah, I thought she'd probably passed away. Surely she is in the highest heaven. Do you know there is not a week that goes by I don't think of the Shabbat I spent with you and her. Remember her story about melody? It has taken me 10 years to find my own melody. I appreciate our teachers, but I've learned to celebrate my own actions and opinions. I am not so afraid to make an error. I have a little girl now. Her middle name is Sophie and I teach her that if she makes a mistake, instead of feeling ashamed or less than Jewish, she should celebrate by singing in a voice only God can hear. If I'd never heard Sophie pray, or if she'd never teased us about our seriousness by switching on that light on Shabbat, I'd never have understood our rules and laws are meant to be borders that form a vessel for spirituality."

Many years have passed since I last saw Sophie. Not so long ago, I realized when I speak of my beloved and respected teachers, they are all rabbis—all men. Sometimes, the strongest influences in one's life are so subtle, it's easy to forget that much of who I've become spiritually is because of the inspiration I've received from the gentle and quiet elder women I've known. Each one had a personal understanding of God. Their faith was solid, whole, and beyond words or explanation. They had strong boundaries and mischievous smiles. They were not talkers, but celebrated their private affairs with God, stretching their arms to ensure boundaries were far enough apart that the vessel of spiritual, holy expression could hold all it needed to say. They had such wealthy souls, their hearts and homes were open to anyone regardless of the spiritual level they were on, or followed. The old women who took time with me knew who they were, where they belonged and their purpose in our world became little seeds I carried with me and watched bloom no matter where I ended up. Their secret, private melodies were so obviously from the heart that strangers fortunate enough to overhear them were certain they were listening to remnants as old as our days in the wilderness.

I have built friendships with Jewish sisters who have roots many believe are traceable to David haMelekh. Their faith and knowledge of Judaism and its practices are beyond reproach. Many of my contemporary sisters are recent returnees, or converts to Judaism in search of understanding and balance in their religious expression. Besides being Jewish, all of us have a common thread: the quest to express an individual spirituality within the boundaries of halakha fully, without fear, shame or censorship. Many rabbis teach the story of the Baal Shem Tov where some 200 years ago, the BeSht predicted, in the days just before Mashiah, all things spiritual will be in the hands of women.
I don't know if Mashiah has signed a lease, or invested in Israeli real estate to date, but I feel a tension in the Jewish world. It's a tension like the one that invaded my newly wedded friends' home on Pesah long ago. Some Orthodox Jewish leaders are saying assimilation of American Jews is like a holocaust—worse than the Nazis (God forbid). Some of our most learned, *hessed*-focused and grass-roots rabbis are compromising. In order to keep their communities alive, strong, and financially viable, they sanction eating in restaurants that are not kosher. They dismiss our Shabbat laws as optional and pen sermons that rationalize intermarriage and call our Torah a series of harmless myths. They are angry their conversions are not recognized and they contend Orthodoxy is marginalizing their ideas and input. They announce that the most Torah observant among the Jewish people have lost spirituality. They too are ashamed that maybe they are not able to fit within Jewish Orthodox boundaries. They find solace and understanding in the more dominant, Christian culture of America, calling themselves bridge-builders. Instead of modeling Jewish spirituality and ethics, they are eager to blend into the greater society, to be accepted and taken seriously.

Have we become our own oppressors? Have the melodies of Orthodoxy become so haughty and superior that we've created a hierarchy of snobs who can't appreciate new songs? Has it become too difficult for the common Jew to adhere to halakha without losing the deep, inner spirituality and faith our ancestors celebrated and expressed so naturally?

I'm a simple, humble Jewish woman. I don't pretend to understand the complicated factions that are rising within and beyond Orthodox Judaism. I worry that our communities are assimilating and our community leaders often times are more interested in baseball scores than studying Torah or finding deeper understanding of our beautiful religion and spiritual path. I cry because we are learning to fear and mistrust each other instead of teaching strength, tolerance, and compassion to the non-Jewish world. I am concerned that the most learned among us are forgetting how to balance strength with compassion. Their creative spirits have been overshadowed by an interpretation of laws and rules that offer such a narrow space, there is little room to celebrate *shalom veShalvah* in our communities, let alone the world. It is tragic that many of us have lost our taste for creating haunting, beautiful melodies that are new, yet feel old, because we fear that sharing our souls with our own people may prove we don't really belong, or were never wanted in the first place.

I am saddened that many traditional Jews spend so much effort making what they perceive as gray into black or white; they have forgotten the world is actually in color. It is equally worrisome our more liberal, grass-roots community leaders have deep souls, yet do not think it worthy to tame and groom their spiritual selves with strong boundaries and observance that connect us to our past, eventually influencing our future and current state of spiritual health.

But, I know my limits. Not long ago, I admitted to myself that it is easier to leave the intellectual parsing and dissection of complex Jewish religious dogma versus spirituality to my teachers, more learned brothers and sisters, or better yet, to haShem. I've become a victim of my own oppression and am afraid my opinion will not only be unwanted in Orthodox circles, but someone will ask me to leave, suggesting I never belonged in the first place. I have also learned that liberal Jewish communities are just as likely to exclude those with an opinion that differs from the majority.

Last Shavuoth I could not stop thinking of Mama, Sophie, and all the elders who have helped shape my soul. I decided I am no longer a child with ears and no voice. I have learned from others and have perfected my practice of Judaism while finding my spiritual center. The elders I cherished over the years have passed on, leaving behind pieces of their souls and an abundant inheritance. Over the years, Orthodox rabbis and teachers have taught me boundaries. They've provided a map that guides me even in the driest, flattest desert. In between these boundaries are memories of Mama blessing the air with Shabbat, teaching me simplicity and the importance of sincere expression of spirituality within our traditions. The sound of Sophie's melody fills this space as well. I sit shoulder to shoulder with women my age who are just one step away from assuming the responsibility of becoming community elders themselves. They've found their spiritual voice and pray to God beneath their noses when no one is the wiser.

In traditional Judaism, our Rebbetzins often appear silent. One must listen closely to hear their voices. They sing strong melodies with silent words. Many have such vast roots it is as though they have no beginning or end. Others come from secular homes, families who have intermarried or have conversions in their histories. But, all sing new songs that may as well be from old voices. They sing of compliance, borders, and rules. They cover their hair and tell stories no one has heard before, because these stories come from their paths and are filled with their spirituality. They have discovered that our Torah is the source of our being. They seek out each other and the men relax, grow quiet in their presence and have more time to pray and strengthen their boundaries as Jews. These holy women exhale belonging while nurturing and encouraging everyone, no matter what sound another person's prayer makes.

These holy Rebbetzins have learned not to operate from anger. They teach that where there is anger, there is no possibility of sustaining a relationship or communication. They teach about the great sin; a sin that can never be excused. What action, speech, or behavior among Jews could be so unforgivable?

They answer with a softness one cannot ignore: When human beings offers you their special gift, something only they can see or teach the world, and we refuse to listen to their contribution and celebrate their presence, there is no way this kind of arrogance can be forgiven. It is bad enough for relationships between Jews and the non-Jewish world to experience this kind of impasse—but for such sadness to exist between Jews is enough to break the heart of the whole world.

Perhaps our collective concern should not be the assimilation of Jewish culture as our great rabbis and thinkers suggest. It might be as important to worry about our individual and collective character traits. If you are standing in the place where you belong, and a family shows up on Shabbat by car because they live too far to walk, why not welcome them? Maybe next year they will buy a home in the neighborhood. If a member of the community is seen buying shrimp at Sam's Club—assume it is a special gift for their non-Jewish neighbor. Isn't it a mitzvah to always assume and think the best of each other? If as an individual, you keep your heart open; your community will reflect this.

Kind, sweet communities attract special people-Jew and non-Jew alike. Conversely, if you draw your boundaries, or speak out about a subject in your "kind and sweet community" and find you are a minority, don't let fear or anger consume or affect you negatively—move on. Keep speaking, keep listening and stay balanced with a little compassion, a little kindness and a lot of strength. It's a privilege to sing an old melody, but the world and haShem are hungry for new songs that have the exact same notes that old voices have already sung.

My great grandmother taught, there are two ways to do things-the right way and the wrong way. The wrong way is telling everyone how to do it the right way. Every Jew is connected to the other—be they Orthodox or Reform; *ger, frum* or *ba'al teshuvah*; Sephardic or Ashkenazic. Each Jew has a special song, a special melody and the whole world enjoys a good tune—one that reflects the past, present, and future. We should fix our ears and eyes to be able to hear, see, and share our own holiness in the world we live in. We should be blessed with the knowledge to know where our boundaries begin and end, and when we take a big breath we should not fear our own healthy expansion.
I was visiting a synagogue earlier this year and a heavy-set woman sitting next to me placed her hands in her lap, turned her palms upward and began to sob. Little tears ran down a face that suggested the woman had aged beyond her years. She wept because she had something to say; she prayed because she believed God was lonely for her voice. She came to the synagogue and sat in the women's section because that is where she belonged. An affinity grew between us in the short time we sat together. It was a beautiful moment of belonging and loneliness, and instead of a transient moment one might attribute to chance, something magical made us look at each other as though we were related. The stranger dropped her gaze to the floor and spoke, "Sorry, my prayers sound like little tears. My grandmother taught me to talk to God with tears. I usually stay home so as not to upset anyone."

I answered, "No problem. God and the world need every tear and every Jew. Did you ever hear the story that one day all things spiritual will be in the hands of women?"
The holy stranger laughed. "I'm just a convert. My husband and I are on vacation. He thinks I'm too emotional. I need to learn more rules. Maybe I'll fit in with time."
And with that parting comment, she stood and disappeared into the crowd. If it had not been Shabbat, I'd have found a pen, written her name down and never lost track of her. This special soul had the capacity to bless the whole world with strong vessels and demand we fill ourselves with tears of *sason veSimha*. These are the kind of people whose melodies sound old, but are really as new as the morning sun. May our people be blessed to find their special melodies and may we never become so afraid of each other that we fail to sing and share our special songs.

[DEA1]Transliteration ok? What is translation, shrouds?